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ABSTRACT

This document is designed to help states and communities develop technical assistance relationships and secure assistance that is responsive to the unique needs of the jurisdiction being served. It is based on the experiences of individuals who have studied and participated in service integration efforts at the state and community levels. It draws from relevant business management and public administration literature on the effective use of consultants and technical assistance. It is designed to offer states and communities practical advice on how to make most effective use of technical assistance, and how to avoid some of the problems experienced and identified by others. Following an introduction in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 reviews reasons for seeking technical assistance. Chapter 3 examines types of technical assistance. Chapter 4 looks at characteristics common to successful efforts and technical assistance relationships. Chapter 5 discusses selecting a technical assistance provider, and Chapter 6 explores how to develop the best relationship with the service provider. Chapter 7 offers a conclusion and a checklist designed to help initiatives as they seek outside assistance. Contains six references. (JB)

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR SERVICE INTEGRATION RESOURCE BRIEF

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So You Think You Need Some Help?

Making Effective Use of Technical Assistance

Charles Bruner

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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NATIONAL CENTER FOR SERVICE INTEGRATION

The National Center for Service Integration (NCSI), established in 1991 with grants from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and private foundations, is a collaboration of six organizations—Mathtech, Inc., Child and Family Policy Center, the National Center for Children in Poverty at Columbia University, National Governors' Association, Policy Studies Associates, Inc., and the Bush Center on Child Development and Social Policy at Yale University. NCSI's mission is to stimulate and actively support service integration efforts across the country by serving as a technical assistance resource and an information clearinghouse for documents, programs, and organizations.

The operating philosophy of NCSI, consistent with its mission, is to collaborate with and complement, rather than attempt to replace, other clearinghouses, consortia, and institutions working in similar and related activities. Although no sharp limitations regarding target groups or services are appropriate, NCSI's initial focus of attention is on the integration of educational, health, and other social services directed to children and families.

ABOUT SERVICE INTEGRATION

NCSI has defined service integration as the process by which a range of educational, health, and social services are delivered in a coordinated way to improve outcomes for individuals and families. Current efforts in service integration strive to overcome the disadvantages of the present fragmented structure of programs and providers, often promulgated by professional specialization.

Effective service integration initiatives emphasize:

- Comprehensive services
- Early intervention and prevention
- Consumer and family-oriented responses
- Family and individual outcomes
- Provider accountability

Current initiatives often involve collaboration and system reform objectives that go well beyond traditional notions of coordination and information sharing. The most ambitious efforts seek the integrated delivery of a full scope of education and human services through collaborations that include schools and major health and social service providers.

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ABOUT THE RESOURCE BRIEFS

NCSI *Resource Briefs* are designed to provide the most current information available on effective practices and strategies on issues or topics frequently encountered by states and communities in their service integration activities. As practice-based documents, *Resource Briefs* are designed to be concise and plainly written, to define a specific service integration issue, and to describe the current state of knowledge and practice about effective issue resolution. They are not intended to be comprehensive or scholarly. Rather, they seek to get useful information into the hands of practitioners in as timely a manner as possible through a sharing of experiences from other service integration efforts around the country.

An Oversight Board selects *Resource Brief* topics, and chooses writers based on their work in the field and their understanding of the issues involved. The Board approves the final draft of all *Resource Briefs* prior to their publication, following a peer review from individuals currently involved in service integration efforts. Members of the Oversight Board are: Charles Bruner (Child and Family Policy Center), chair; William A. Morrill (Mathtech, Inc.); Judith E. Jones (National Center for Children in Poverty); Sharon Lynn Kagan (Bush Center on Child Development and Social Policy); Frank Farrow (Center for the Study of Social Policy); David Hornbeck; Karen Pittman (Academy for Educational Development); and Lisbeth Schorr (Project on Effective Services).

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CHAPTER 1
Introduction

Throughout the country, states and communities are searching for ways to better address the needs of children and families by changing the ways they finance and operate programs. These efforts often require that a variety of public agencies, community organizations, and professional disciplines come together to collaborate and integrate services.

Embedded in the philosophy behind these efforts is the recognition that the current fragmented service system often does not provide a good match between what families need and what the system offers them. Service integration strategies, therefore, usually aim to reduce the fragmentation, categorization, and professional specialization that characterize the current service delivery system, and to develop a more seamless system of services from the perspective of families being served.

Those individuals and groups who step forward to plan and implement service integration initiatives face major challenges. The process of integration often entails fundamental changes to the ways agencies conduct business. Such efforts require cross-agency and interprofessional cooperation, and participants must learn the language, structures, and goals of different professions and organizations, along with adjusting to a collaborative decision-making process.

Integration initiatives recognize these challenges and usually include cross-agency planning and governing processes. Almost universally, participants in planning and governing these efforts want solutions to be unique and adapted or "customized" to their own jurisdiction's particular needs—but they also do not want to "re-invent the wheel."

Successful service integration must include a thoughtful and deliberate planning effort and careful, thorough implementation. Increasingly, funding is available to support the planning and implementation of service integration initiatives—from the agencies themselves, through government appropriation (at the state, local, and federal level), and through foundation grants. This funding, sometimes referred to as "glue" money because it is designed to bond different organizations together, supports initiatives in several ways. In addition to supporting staff positions within the initiative itself, the funding often is used to secure outside technical assistance[1] from others who, through their experiences with similar initiatives elsewhere, can help address the challenges of the planning and implementation process. While outside assistance is no substitute for sufficient, competent, and committed internal staff, it can help the staff shorten the overall planning and implementation process and can steer the initiative clear of stumbling blocks.

Currently, neither job descriptions for technical assistance providers nor credentials or professional training exist for those who do this work. States and communities must use their own judgment and discretion both in identifying their technical assistance needs and in contracting for such assistance.

This resource brief is based on the experiences of individuals who have studied and participated in service integration efforts at the state and community level. It draws from relevant business management and public administration literature on the effective use of consultants and technical assistance. It is designed to offer states and communities practical advice on how to make most effective use of technical assistance, and how to avoid some of the problems experienced and identified by others. The ultimate purpose is to help states and communities develop technical assistance relationships and secure assistance that is responsive to the unique needs of the jurisdiction being served.

CHAPTER 2
Reasons for Seeking Technical Assistance

States and communities have several valid reasons for seeking support and technical assistance for their service integration efforts. Four of them apply to seeking any kind of technical assistance:

- ▲ They need expertise which they currently do not possess and which can be provided through outside consultants.
- ▲ They want a working knowledge of, and the ability to draw lessons from, other similar state or community efforts.
- ▲ They cannot free those individuals with the expertise within their organizations to perform the needed work because this would disrupt other duties.
- ▲ They need time- and resource-limited assistance, which lends itself to a specific contract rather than to the establishment of an ongoing staff position.

In addition, participants in service integration efforts may seek technical assistance for two reasons more specific to service integration itself:

- ▲ They need an independent perspective, neither attached nor obligated to any specific agency or organization involved, which will be regarded as legitimate and impartial to all participants.
- ▲ They need technical assistance that cuts across a number of professional disciplines and can effectively reach service providers across those disciplines—a cross-cutting form of expertise not present within any of the organizations in the initiative.

States' and communities' reasons for needing technical assistance should help determine the type of technical assistance they will seek. Prior to soliciting technical assistance, states and communities should identify their reasons for seeking this outside help and the issues they wish the technical assistance provider to address. To the extent possible, everyone involved in the service integration effort should clearly understand the reasons for seeking this outside help. They also should recognize that the provider of technical assistance will need staff support within the initiative which provides information to the provider on a timely basis about the activities undertaken by the initiative. Given that there is likely to be a diverse group of people involved, newly introduced to each other in addressing a common concern, a complete communications flow among members and the technical assistance provider will help to avoid misunderstandings.

In addition to understanding what technical assistance can provide, participants in service integration efforts must recognize what technical assistance is unlikely to be able to do. While technical assistance can "add value" both by assisting in "technology transfer" and by identifying barriers and potential stumbling blocks, the success of service integration efforts largely depends on the work and commitment of those within the initiative. The vast majority of the expertise needed to meet initiative goals must reside or be developed within the members of the service integration effort. Technical assistance providers will not be able to "solve" problems alone, nor should initiatives become dependent on them to "fix" new problems as they inevitably occur in the process of implementation and adaptation.

Those individuals and groups who step forward to plan and implement service integration initiatives face major challenges, as the process of integration often entails fundamental changes to the ways agencies conduct business.

Further, most of the work and recommendations of the providers of technical assistance will place new responsibilities and demands on those within the initiative, rather than relieving them of responsibility to work on behalf of the initiative. Eventually, sustaining an initiative through its implementation and adaptation phases will require that the knowledge and skills that technical assistance initially provides are learned by those people whose day-to-day on-site responsibilities are to make the initiative's efforts successful.

Finally, technical assistance will not be helpful if people really do not want it to help. If members of the initiative are not willing to share the real problems they face with the technical assistance provider, are unwilling to consider making changes within their institutions even when those are needed if the initiative is to succeed, or have already "distanced" themselves from the technical assistance process, both the initiative and the provider of technical assistance ultimately will be frustrated by the effort.

* * * * *

To help illustrate technical assistance specific to service integration, two examples appear below:

Gaining an impartial perspective. In one city, whose school board had been divided bitterly and whose policies had been the subject of intense criticism from the community, the process of fostering communication and collaboration among schools and other community agencies and organizations came to a standstill—despite recognition of the need for linkages by school officials and community groups. Joint funding from the school board and the mayor's office enabled the groups to seek help from a respected nonprofit organization, which was regarded by all parties as an impartial and constructive voice in the community. The organization played a critical role, not only in providing technical assistance in creating school-linked services, but also in facilitating and setting the framework for mediating disputes between school and community. In this way, discussions and actions could proceed.

Creating cross-cutting expertise. In another city, planners reached a decision to address the issue of "adolescents at-risk" through a partnership with schools, human service and health agencies, and community organizations. The partnership contracted for technical assistance with a team of evaluators who had expertise in different areas, including education, teenage pregnancy, and employment and training. These evaluators worked together to design a cross-system approach to evaluating the impact of the city's youth services initiative. The approach represented a bridge between the different languages and outcome orientations expressed in the fields of health, education and human services, and job training.

CHAPTER 3
Types of Technical Assistance

There are two general types of technical assistance: (1) assistance to fill specific knowledge gaps about general or particular substantive topics; and (2) assistance with the conceptual or management process in designing and carrying out an initiative (sometimes referred to as "facilitation" or "guidance in strategic planning").

These two types of assistance often require different approaches, skills, and duration. Filling knowledge gaps usually requires specific expertise, often over a short period of time. Assistance with conceptualizing and management requires strong process skills over a longer period of time. More generally, in discussing school-community initiatives Sidney Gardner argues that:

> Consultants are at their most effective in three roles: (1) questioning the basic policy assumptions of the process or pushing and helping the local team to make those policy assumptions clear if they have not yet been stated, (2) networking with project planners in other communities and states to give local planners a comparative sense of how another site handled the same issue, and (3) providing actual expertise with particular school-linked service efforts in which the consultant may have personal skills and knowledge. Such expertise might be in the areas of information systems, federal reimbursements, or foundation funding.[2]

In many states and communities, service integration initiatives have found that their needs for technical assistance include both the need for help on filling specific knowledge gaps and more general technical assistance in initiative planning and management.

Technical Assistance to Fill Specific Knowledge Gaps

When states and communities have identified specific substantive issues, they may benefit from discrete and usually short-term assistance in addressing them. In such instances, providers of technical assistance can help in the following ways:

- Technical assistance providers can help introduce and familiarize participants in a service integration initiative with the experiences of other similar state and local efforts, thereby sharing common experiences and lessons learned.
- Technical assistance providers can provide information on exemplary programs and practices undertaken in sites that the service integration effort is interested in replicating or adapting, including assistance in the design and implementation of certain programs and practices through training and staff development.
- Technical assistance providers can assist in the design and implementation of financing tools, management information systems, or other technical supports for which specialized expertise is needed, again drawing on successful efforts undertaken in other initiatives.
- Technical assistance providers can share specific program knowledge and assistance in interpreting state/federal program regulations and legal responsibilities and in effectively making use of complex programs such as Medicaid (Title XIX), child welfare

In many states and communities, service integration initiatives have found that their needs for technical assistance include both the need for help on filling specific knowledge gaps and more general technical assistance in initiative planning and management.

and adoption assistance (Title IV-E), compensatory education (Chapter I), maternal and child health services (Title V), and special education services (P.L. 99-457).

- Technical assistance providers can build support by using peer practitioners from other initiatives to speak directly to how individual members of the initiative can incorporate practices into their own organization roles and responsibilities.

For this type of technical assistance, the knowledge base of the technical assistance provider about the specific subject matter of interest to the initiative, the ability of the provider to tailor that knowledge to the particular circumstances of the service integration effort, and the skill of the provider in communicating that knowledge, are critical to the provider's utility to the state or community. The provider must have a familiarity with, but not necessarily a deep understanding of, the overall background and purpose of the service integration initiative being undertaken.

* * * * *

To illustrate ways that technical assistance can fill specific knowledge gaps, the three examples below demonstrate programmatic assistance, technical support in financing, and technical support in information development:

Programmatic assistance. One state, seeking to develop "wrap-around" services to bring children back from high-cost residential settings to their home communities, received the outside support they needed from a series of workshops conducted by expert trainers in using "flexible funds" to address family and community needs in the areas of child welfare, mental health, and juvenile justice. These trainers came from a state that had successfully developed these services, and they had strong backgrounds in the relevant disciplines. They could communicate with the different constituencies needed.

Technical support in financing. The key to developing the health component of school-based family centers in one state was the development of a financing system for the schools—so that they could pay for new and existing health services through Medicaid. Using an expert's technical assistance, the state designed a "user-friendly" system enabling the schools to become Medicaid providers and to obtain Medicaid funds for services provided to Medicaid-eligible children.

Technical support in information development. One community collaboration, recognizing its needs for a better system for managing information across systems, contracted with a national consultant to help conduct a "datamatch" of the public services provided to students and their families in eight schools. While the collaboration itself formulated the necessary questions and drew policy conclusions from the results, they relied on the consultant's technical expertise to design a system for obtaining data from a number of different agencies and organizations and combining it into a common system.

Technical Assistance on Planning and Managing Service Integration Efforts

In addition to these discrete and usually short-term needs for assistance, states and communities also may require longer-term and more general assistance in conceptualizing, designing, and implementing their service integration efforts. In such instances, technical assistance providers offer guidance in planning and facilitating the overall "service integration process." In this role, the potential value of technical assistance providers includes the following:

- Technical assistance providers can help in strategic planning, problem identification and resolution, and general team-building, including the mediation of disputes.
- Technical assistance providers can help conceptualize and aid in systemic thinking by providing an outside perspective that can help distinguish "the forest from the trees," and they can identify creative solutions that might not be identified by the service integration group members.
- Technical assistance providers can help identify, recruit, and coordinate the work of providers of more specific and discrete technical assistance around specific problems or concerns faced by the initiative.
- Technical assistance providers can help build capacity within the service integration effort so that future problems and planning, design, and implementation efforts can proceed without further assistance from outside consultants.

A technical assistance provider who maintains a consistent relationship with the staff of the initiative will be better able to provide advice and counsel appropriate to the unique circumstances and personalities involved in the service integration effort, as well as to establish needed trust and credibility.

For this second type of technical assistance, the relationship between the technical assistance provider and the service integration effort is crucial. The provider must understand and appreciate the history and group dynamics within the state or community and provide as much continuity as possible. It is expensive, in lost time and lost momentum, to educate new technical assistance providers about a service integration effort's current status and past history. It sometimes is impossible to regain lost trust among members of a service integration initiative if a provider must be replaced.

The relationship between the technical assistance provider and the initiative must include a framework for contacting and hearing from the provider. This is often best achieved by having a staff person within the initiative responsible for organizing the provider's activities. A technical assistance provider who maintains a consistent relationship with the staff of the initiative will be better able to provide advice and counsel appropriate to the unique circumstances and personalities involved in the service integration effort, as well as to establish needed trust and credibility.

The skills needed in providing this type of technical assistance are very much related to process. At the same time, however, the provision of such technical assistance requires a good deal of expertise regarding the issues and problems confronting the service integration effort. A technical assistance provider cannot facilitate without a strong grasp of the general subject matter under discussion. In addition, as the initiative's conceptualizing and design work proceeds, this also results in the identification of more specific and discrete technical assistance needs. The technical assistance provider should have a knowledge of others who

have the expertise needed by the initiative at different stages of its development, and should recognize the appropriate times to call those experts in, brief them on the status of the initiative, and help assure that the assistance they provide is at a level appropriate to the current status of the initiative.

In short, this type of technical assistance is highly interactive. At its best, it creates capacity among the staff of the service integration effort to address future concerns and issues which the effort will face. The technical assistance provider helps the initiative identify and address its own problems and concerns. This, in turn, builds ownership within the service integration effort. In one business management guide to using consultants, this type of consultant is defined as an "interactive consultant," with the following benefits ascribed:

> [The interactive consultant] works closely with the people who will be most affected by any changes, involves them in the problem analysis, and ensures that they share credit for the solution. Thus [the consultant] eliminates the sense of threat many outside consultants arouse. . . . [C]onsultants who leave behind lasting beneficial changes in the way their clients think about problems are worth far more than the technicians who merely fix problems. . . . Again, the key to success in gaining acceptance of their solutions is the deliberate involvement of company personnel in the research, investigation, analysis, consideration of alternatives, and selection of the program of action. The result is a solid commitment of company personnel to the solution and to its effective implementation because they believe the solution is their own.[3]

* * * * *

Two different uses of technical assistance to plan and manage institutional change are illustrated below:

Initial activities. One community in the initial stages of exploring service integration options recognized that its school, the health centers, the youth programs, and the human service agencies all felt "something needed to be done" to encourage coordination. At the same time, the community did not know how to mobilize this good will around a specific issue or concern. Through the mayor's office, the community secured funds from a local foundation to contract with a technical assistance provider. The job was to help a cross-agency task force develop a specific vision for children and families for the community, with specific expectations for improving outcomes. The provider helped the community focus on concrete issues that needed to be addressed through collaborative actions based on an underlying common vision.

Ongoing involvement. In one national foundation's work with several cities seeking to develop school-linked services for "at-risk youth," participating cities have benefited from ongoing support from one consistent provider of technical assistance, who also "brokers" other technical assistance for specific issues and problems. By maintaining this continuity of contact, this provider can offer on-going and changing assistance and support as each initiative evolves. The key to the success of this approach, one city contends, is that there is "someone" who knows the personalities involved and the history of the initiative and can brief other professionals who come in to assist on specific topics.

CHAPTER 4
Elements of Success in Technical Assistance Relationships

Both the literature on management consulting and the public administration literature offer some generally useful advice on what makes for successful consulting relationships. Similarly, the experiences of states and communities involved in service integration initiatives who have contracted for technical assistance offer insights into what makes for effective technical assistance.

The following characteristics are common to all these perspectives:

- The initiative has carefully and clearly defined both the problems for which technical assistance is needed and the role the technical assistance provider is expected to play in solving these problems. (In some instances, particularly at the initial stages of an initiative's planning, the assistance itself may simply serve to define more clearly what problems the initiative is committed to addressing.)
- The technical assistance provider has the skills needed to fulfill the defined role, including both the technical expertise needed and the problem-solving, group mediation and team-building skills, or capacities needed (which may constitute very different skills and relate to the different types of technical assistance described above).
- The initiative and the technical assistance provider agree to the amount and duration of time needed to achieve the goals for the relationship.
- The technical assistance provider is supported by and receives access to those individuals in the initiative who will be called on to carry out any recommendations developed as part of the technical assistance effort, and he or she is able to develop trust with them.
- There are clearly established channels for communicating between the initiative and the technical assistance provider, often with at least one primary contact person within the initiative who can assure that the provider receives the timely and complete information needed to offer meaningful assistance.
- The technical assistance is structured to be flexible and adaptable enough to respond to the unique needs and circumstances of the initiative, and of the evolutionary nature of the initiative, while it is disciplined enough to be accountable to meeting initiative objectives.

These points have been described succinctly by Zimmerman and Tobia following their survey of clients and training consultants on what makes for successful outcomes from consulting relationships:

1. Agreement on clear, specific, visible objectives.
2. Agreement on evaluation methods.
3. Flexibility in approach.
4. Commitment to change from key personnel.
5. Thorough consultant preparation.[4]

Recipients of technical assistance must work not only to articulate their specific needs, but to ensure as the process continues that the solutions offered by the provider are truly tailored to be as useful as intellectually sound.

In service integration efforts, where there are multiple agencies and organizations involved and each one's commitment may be needed for success, a consensus on goals is as crucial as gaining commitment from organizational representatives to the technical assistance process. If technical assistance is to result in the development and implementation of a joint agenda agreed to by a number of different organizations, the technical assistance itself must be accountable to that joint agenda rather than to any one specific organization. The agencies and organizations involved must decide together what they want the provider to help them accomplish before they hire the provider. Their evaluation of the provider is then based upon this joint agenda, rather than on the potentially conflicting perceptions, agenda, and expectations of each individual agency or organization.

The issue of credibility is particularly tricky for technical assistance providers working with service integration initiatives. Professionals from different disciplines naturally tend to find people from their own discipline as the most credible sources of information (e.g., teachers are most likely to try new instructional techniques when other teachers demonstrate them; or physicians are most likely to see the value of paraprofessionals conducting outreach efforts when a respected fellow physician explains the process). There should be explicit and open recognition by the group that no technical assistance provider can have experiences in all disciplines—and acknowledgment by the technical assistance provider of any gaps in the provider's knowledge that need to be filled.

Likewise, the ability of the technical assistance provider to tailor assistance to the needs and individuality of the community is very important. Each initiative is to some extent unique and will become impatient with a provider who seems to offer general solutions without adapting them to the specific characteristics of the situation at hand. Recipients of technical assistance must work not only to articulate their specific needs, but to ensure as the process continues that the solutions offered by the provider are truly tailored to be as useful as intellectually sound.

CHAPTER 5
Issues in Selecting a Technical Assistance Provider

While some states and communities may have considerable flexibility in acquiring technical assistance, others will have a number of legal requirements on how outside assistance may be secured. Competitive bidding may be required in some instances, particularly for larger contracts, and procedures for selection must be adhered to in awarding funds.

Whether or not states and communities simply hire a technical assistance provider or develop a request for proposal (RFP) and use a formal review and selection process, there are important elements to consider in identifying and selecting providers. When the initiative can clearly define its needs, even seemingly cumbersome regulations and procedures will not prevent the initiative from securing appropriate assistance. It becomes a matter of incorporating within the selection process the criteria that will discriminate among potential technical assistance providers to identify those who can best meet the initiative's needs.

In identifying potential providers of technical assistance, it is wise to solicit candidate recommendations from a wide variety of sources, including the participants in the service integration process, community representatives, and other service providers in the community who previously have sought and used technical assistance providers. This may involve a two-step process of first identifying persons who know the field of technical assistance providers with the skills needed for the task, and then contacting those persons for recommendations.

Casting a wide net and involving the participants in the service integration effort can serve two purposes. First, this will generate a broad list of candidates. Second, this will enhance community investment in the technical assistance process.

Where an RFP process is involved, the written materials required from the potential technical assistance providers should reflect those skills the initiative requires. Where a selection process incorporates scoring, the scoring should be consistent with the initiative's needs from technical assistance providers. Where the process can include personal interviews or meetings with prospective providers of technical assistance, schedules and goals for those meetings can help determine the appropriateness of "fit" between the provider and the initiative, and particularly the degree to which temperaments and personalities are compatible. If the work with the technical assistance provider needs to be highly interactive with service integration staff, as it is likely to be, assuring a good fit is essential, and personal interviews should be incorporated into the process.

The following step-by-step list, originally developed for business in selecting consultants, spells out important points that can be adapted by states and communities in contracting for technical assistance:

1. Prepare a statement outlining the nature, general scope, and purposes of the assignment to be undertaken prior to contacting the prospective consultants.

2. Consider the general qualifications of a number of consultants who appear to be capable of meeting the requirements, and select for interview one or more who appear to be the best qualified. Reference checks should be a normal part of the preliminary search for consulting help.

In identifying potential providers of technical assistance, it is wise to solicit candidate recommendations from a wide variety of sources, including the participants in the service integration process, community representatives, and other service providers in the community. . .

3. Preliminary discussions should be held with each of the potential consultants selected—to discuss the project and their approach to it. They should be asked to submit proposals explaining their plans.

4. The client should study the proposals in terms of the consultant's understanding of the problem, approach, probable benefits and cost, as well as the particular experience and ability of the consultant to meet the requirements of the engagement. Care should be taken to consider the qualifications of the personnel who will actually be working on the project.

5. The references of those consultants being seriously considered should be checked in depth.

6. The selection should be based on a careful weighing of the above factors. Final negotiations should follow the selection of the consultant.[5]

These final negotiations, according to the list's author, also should state clearly the expectations regarding mutual obligations, supervision of the work, and the manner in which staff will evaluate the consultant's work.

In conducting detailed reference checks, staff should include questions that can help identify the potential technical assistance provider's strengths and weaknesses, including the following:

- What was the nature of the work done by the consultant?
- Did the professional staff assigned to the project demonstrate professional competence, objectivity, and integrity?
- Did they work constructively with client personnel?
- Did one or more principals spend sufficient time in supervising the work?
- Were the developed solutions complete, timely, practical, and suited to the client's specific needs?
- Was the suggested course of action the most effective and economical from the client's point of view?
- Was the work accomplished within reasonable time and fee limits?
- What was the operating impact of the consultant's work on the client organization?
- What is the overall evaluation by client executives of the value of the consulting engagement?
- Would the client retain the consultant again if he or she had the need for this kind of professional service?[6]

The following questions also are pertinent for efforts that involve work with a number of different agencies and organizations:

- Did the consultant have an understanding of all the organizations and professions with which the consultant worked, and was the consultant able to communicate effectively with each, as well as facilitate communication among them?
- Did the consultant have a generally recognized "objective" perspective which was not overly influenced by a particular disciplinary approach?
- Was the consultant able to identify others who could provide specialized assistance in areas where the consultant did not have a particular expertise?

While this background work in identifying and securing technical assistance represents little more than good common sense, the fact is that these or similar steps often are not followed in selecting technical assistance providers. While these suggested steps are time-consuming activities, the key to making a good choice for a technical assistance provider is to do this advanced planning.

A mistake that many initiatives make, particularly as they start out, is in believing that someone from the outside has special wisdom that can provide ready-made solutions for them. Most of the wisdom, in fact, must reside within the initiative. The advance planning involved, in identifying the problem to be addressed and the technical assistance provider's role in assisting in the solution, can avoid retracing steps later or correcting misunderstandings between the provider and the initiative.

The advance planning involved, in identifying the problem to be addressed and the technical assistance provider's role in assisting in the solution, can avoid the need to retrace steps later or to correct misunderstandings between the provider and the initiative.

CHAPTER 6
Building a Relationship with Technical Assistance Providers

The consulting or technical assistance process is always a two-way relationship which requires communication and trust to be effective. Maintaining a good working relationship with providers of technical assistance in a service integration effort presents special logistical challenges. The work is likely to involve activities with a number of different organizations that have different perspectives and professional orientations.

Specific strategies should be developed that can assure the following:

- Timely introduction to key participants in the service integration effort, plus a process for similar introductions to new key participants in the event of turnover within the initiative.
- Clear statements of goals and objectives for the technical assistance relationship and the investment of the provider in meeting these goals through an evaluation system that measures success.
- A communication system that keeps all participants and the technical assistance provider informed about developments in the initiative.

Relationships with key participants

The introduction of the technical assistance provider to all key participants in the initiative is likely to be critical to a staff's acceptance of the provider's recommendations. Before those participants will accept and listen to the advice of a provider, they must understand why the provider was enlisted, what the provider is expected to do, and what level of cooperation and assistance the provider will require. They must understand the provider's background and recognize the provider's areas of expertise. When there is turnover of key participants within the initiative, new staff members should receive a similar introduction to the provider.

Establishing these relationships at the outset is very important to the technical assistance process. The later in the process providers become involved, the more learning they have to do about the history of the initiative before they can offer help, as well as the more correcting of avoidable false steps they are likely to face. Staff, however, can help prepare outside technical assistance providers who arrive midstream by giving them extensive background on the initiative and its staff, its goals, and its experiences to date. Withholding or omitting any information can "trip up" the technical assistance provider, who will have to expend valuable time and energy to regain trust and establish credibility if action taken by the technical assistance provider needs to be corrected because incomplete information was given.

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An evaluation system for measuring provider performance

An effective relationship involves mutual responsibilities and mutual accountabilities. Providers of technical assistance should feel accountable and responsible for meeting the goals for the initiative in improving outcomes for children and families. This means that members of the initiative should review and evaluate technical assistance providers with respect to their help in meeting those goals. A structure for tracking, reviewing, and evaluating the performance of the technical assistance provider on an ongoing basis is important both to assure accountability, and to assist the provider in making the technical assistance more relevant and useful to the project.

The collaborative may want to develop a checklist of goals and expectations for the technical assistance provider to serve as a basis for periodic review. As mentioned earlier, these goals and expectations should be developed jointly by the members of the collaborative to avoid either the occasion or the perception that a provider is acting as the agent for any individual member. In addition, a forum for participants to give feedback constructively to the technical assistance provider will help avoid resentment or frustration on the part of staff members who do not feel well served.

A communications system on initiative development

Many service integration initiatives have found it necessary to designate one individual within the initiative to serve as the lead contact with a technical assistance provider to assure that information on work progress is shared with the members of the service integration initiative as well as the provider. In service integration efforts, where representatives of organizations with different backgrounds and missions are working together while maintaining their overall independence, it is important that such information be shared in a timely fashion so that misunderstandings and miscommunications are kept to a minimum.

For example, in one state, a technical assistance provider works with fifteen local initiatives. The directors of each initiative attend monthly meetings sponsored by the state lead agency to maintain regular contact with the technical assistance provider and to have an ongoing process for circulating information among the initiatives. In another state, a project director writes and circulates a monthly newsletter to disseminate information among the local initiatives in her state. She also serves as a liaison between the local initiatives, state officials, and other technical assistance providers.

CHAPTER 7
Conclusion and Checklist

Technical assistance providers can be exceedingly helpful to service integration initiatives. They can help to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the process of change. Outside technical assistance providers, however, cannot do it themselves. Rather, they should be considered as potentially useful resources to enhance the capacity of those within the service integration initiative to produce needed change. The challenge to successfully integrating services and producing systemic change largely rests with those within the system.

A major part of the responsibility in making the technical assistance relationship a productive one rests with the service integration initiative's role in securing and using outside technical assistance. The following checklist, based on the previous discussion, is designed to help initiatives as they seek outside assistance.

Key Points in Making Effective Use of Technical Assistance in Service Integration Initiatives:

- Identify, as clearly as possible, the problems for which outside technical assistance is sought and the ways that technical assistance can be useful in identifying and implementing solutions.
- Enlist the cooperation, support, and involvement of key individuals within the initiative in securing the outside technical assistance.
- Gain a clear commitment from initiative participants to share the initiative's "real" problems with the provider so that disputes can be resolved promptly and not hinder progress.
- Identify the skills needed from the technical assistance provider, both related to technical expertise and process expertise, and the scope and duration of the technical assistance that will be needed to complete the task.
- Establish a process for selecting a technical assistance provider that both clarifies what the expectations of the provider are and allows the initiative to select a provider with the necessary skills.
- Conduct reference checks that cover all key aspects of the provider's responsibilities under the current initiative, and seek personal contact prior to selection to ensure that the provider is compatible with all participants in the initiative.
- Assure that the technical assistance provider serves the needs of the initiative as a whole and does not represent (or appear to represent) a single organizational or professional interest within that initiative.
- Develop a mechanism of communications through which both the technical assistance provider and the initiative's members are kept informed of all relevant work activities within the initiative.
- Establish clear expectations for the technical assistance provider, including a framework for evaluating the provider's work continually through the process.
- Make clear that the relationship is interactive and that the expectation for the provider is to impart skills to initiative members—so they can address future problems and challenges without as much need for outside assistance.

REFERENCES

1. Throughout this guide 'technical assistance' refers to the outside support or help that states and communities seek in developing service integration efforts. This is a term commonly used by governments and foundations. The business management literature uses the term 'consulting,' so when that literature is cited, the author uses that term. The two terms, however, refer to the same general activity. In this guide, technical assistance covers a broader set of endeavors than do the terms 'facilitation' or 'strategic planning assistance,' although these can be the forms of technical assistance sought by states and communities.

2. Gardner, S. L. (1992). Key issues in developing school-linked, integrated services. *The Future of Children, 2* (1), Center for the Future of Children, David and Lucille Packard Foundation, p. 88.

3. Easton, T. A. & Conant, R. W. (1985). *Using consultants: A consumer's guide for managers*. Chicago, IL: Probus Publishing Company, pp. 30–32.

4. Zimmerman, J. W. & Tobia, P. M. (1978, Dec.). Programming your outside consultants for success. *Training and Development Journal, 32* (12), pp. 14–19. (Findings about what to avoid in consultant relationships were useful. For example, clients were most likely to blame themselves for insufficient follow-up with consultants. Consultants were most likely to blame themselves for insufficient follow-up and for too little involvement of upper-level members of their consulting firm when they relied on less-experienced employees, with too little knowledge or status, to produce results. Clients were most likely to blame consultants for using prepackaged programs and for failing to understand the clients' business. Consultants were most likely to blame clients for failing to gain commitments to change from key managers, and for a lack of openness about underlying problems and concerns.)

5. Shay, P. W. (1974). *How to get the best results from management consultants*. New York, NY: Association of Consulting Management Engineers, pp. 21–22.

6. Ibid., p. 31.

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NCSI provides technical assistance and maintains a computerized file of practitioners, policymakers, and consultants, who have expertise in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of collaborative initiatives. For information, call (703) 824-7447 or write to NCSI c/o Mathtech, Inc., 5111 Leesburg Pike, Suite 702, Falls Church, VA 22041.